

A HUNDRED WOLVES: ESSAY REVIEW OF
JOE NICKELL'S *LOOKING FOR A MIRACLE*¹

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The best introduction I have ever read concerning parapsychology is in the December 1987 issue of the journal, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences (BBS)*. In it, no less than fifty scholars offered commentaries regarding two target articles: one by K. R. Rao and John Palmer, and the other by James Alcock. Responses by the authors of these two articles are included, following the cross-fire of referees. This tremendous exchange between parapsychologists and sceptics occupied more than a hundred pages of that issue, and I strongly recommend it to anyone who has had ears exclusively for the attorney's arguments in the case for parapsychology.

Sceptic David Navon, one of the fifty referees, began his commentary with a Jewish joke (Navon, 1987, p. 399):—

- Yesterday, while I was walking alone in the forest, I was attacked by 100 wolves.
- How do you know there were 100? Did you have a chance to count?
- Anyhow, there were at least 50.
- Couldn't there have been 20?
- Why haggle? Isn't even one wolf dangerous enough?
- And did you actually see that wolf?
- So, what else could have been rustling there in the bushes?

This joke lucidly depicts what appear to be the claims of preternatural and psychical phenomena throughout history from the sceptical viewpoint: it is not necessary to be an acute observer to notice, upon a first glance at the historical panorama, that the claims of these phenomena have been reduced to progressively more mediocre effects, to a 'rustling' of psi.

Within the last few centuries, the processes of beatification and canonization have included literally dozens upon dozens of the most stupendous miracles by mystics. Since the Enlightenment, however, the role of miracles has been downplayed, even by Church tenets. Afterwards, a fever for spiritualism surged, leading to the study of a handful of cases of psychic virtuosi (such as Home and Palladino) which, in quantity, were considerably less than past religious miracle-workers. But in more recent years even the milder claims of physical mediumship have been soft-pedalled by modern parapsychologists. So the Rhine school became content with investigating psi in an extremely modest way—but always assuming that behind it existed something bigger that would end up revolutionizing science, refuting materialism, etc. To use Navon's metaphor, 'there must be a wolf behind the rustling'.

It seems curious that so few voices have been raised against this dwarfing tendency. Of the fifty referees in *BBS*, for example, only sceptic Clark Glymour (1987) and believer Stephen Braude (1987) held that the Rhinean method is grossly inadequate. In his commentary, "ESP and the Big Stuff", Glymour holds that the more minuscule the effects, the greater the suspicion that the statistical anomalies are due to an artefact. This is why Glymour,

¹ Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1993. 225 pp. \$23.95.

playing the cynical role of Herod Antipas before Jesus (remember the film *Jesus Christ Superstar*?) demands of parapsychologists (Glymour, 1987, p.590):—

Show us somebody who can control the big effects . . . Make things jump about without touching them—big things. Move a mountain or two without applying any force. Let Randi watch. Go for the Big Stuff and everyone will take notice, without the aid of any statistics.

An appeal which he justifies for the very compelling reason that (ibid.):—

Explaining the minuscule effect by an extraordinary cause is always cavalier, always unwarranted, and ever unconvincing.

The broad aims of the Society for Psychical Research were to make “. . . an organised and systematic attempt to investigate that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, physical and spiritualistic” (*Proc SPR, Vol. I*). None the less—and in spite of the traditional independence of the English before the world—in recent decades this Society has been influenced to a certain degree by the American school, which presents itself as the dominant paradigm in contemporary parapsychology. Like Braude and the original founders of the S.P.R., I have become interested exclusively in the affirmations of grand psi. However, differing from Braude and the S.P.R., I am not interested in investigating the cries of ‘here come twenty wolves’—rather a hundred of them! Therefore, and in spite of the fact that I am not a Christian, my case material is the stories of alleged miracles, especially those which have been thoroughly investigated by the Catholic Church.

I am not alone in this stance. In the opening paragraphs of *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* Herbert Thurston states that, although mystics do not possess the monopoly on preternatural phenomena, their alleged prodigies are far more stupendous than those of secular psychics. And as if this were not enough, Thurston adds that the phenomena documented in the processes of canonization “are more well proven than any that could be found in the Proceedings of the S.P.R.” (Thurston, 1952, p.17).

Why don’t modern parapsychologists pay greater attention to the clamours of the hundred wolves? Why must the majority insist upon psi rustling? Is it enough to say, as Palmer and Rao did in their response to Glymour and Braude, that they simply “shy away from such research”? (Palmer & Rao, 1987, p.622).

THE FAGGOT FALLACY

Upon reading for the first time the late D. S. Rogo’s book, *Miracles: A Parascientific Inquiry into Wondrous Phenomena* (Rogo, 1982), my secular reaction against the apologetics I had been taught as a boy seemed vindicated: miracles could at last be explained away by ‘parascience’!

I had to wait years to realize how naïve I was . . . The issue of Rogo’s colourful personality cannot be dealt with here, however. Suffice to say that, even though every time I read him his intelligence continues to impress me, the truth is that this pop parapsychologist was quite a sceptic in some cases—but all too credulous in others! (For instance, a few weeks before the tragedy of his murder I held a discussion by correspondence with Rogo concerning the ridiculous theme of UFO abductions, in which he was a staunch believer.)

I knew this well before reading Joe Nickell's latest book, *Looking for a Miracle* (Nickell, 1993), which is, in a way, a response to Rogo's book.²

Miracles strongly captured the attention of some parapsychologists. In this *Journal* it was reviewed twice (Alvarado, 1985; Evans, 1991), and for *JASPR* a standard review was not sufficient: an extensive essay was dedicated to it (Grosso, 1983). Therefore, it is worthwhile to review the sceptic's response to *Miracles* to some extent.

Nickell is an investigative writer and a member of the executive council of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). *Looking for a Miracle* is, as far as I know, the first attempt to enter into the theme of religious paranormal phenomena from a *natural Weltanschauung* (in order to distinguish it from the super-natural and the para-normal world views). In contrast to Nickell and other CSICOP sceptics, Thurston was sceptical only to a certain degree: he did not profess a natural vision of the world. As a Catholic priest, Thurston believed in the supernatural; and as an attentive observer of the psychical research which was flourishing in his country, he believed in the paranormal as well.

But I cannot take space here to offer a detailed commentary on the content of *Looking for a Miracle*: magical icons, mystical relics—including the blood of St Januarius and the so-called Incorruptibles—Pentecostal powers, miraculous pictures, faith healing, Marian apparitions, levitation, bilocation, exorcism, and more. In this review I am going to focus exclusively on the abyss lying between the methodologies proposed by Nickell and Rogo for the study of both miraculous religious phenomena and the spontaneous cases with which the readers of this *Journal* are more familiar.

In order to illustrate this point, permit me to cite a response by Rogo when he was confronted by critic Rodger Anderson, who labelled as a "fairy-tale school of parapsychology" (Anderson, 1981, p.66) the careless assembly of various anecdotes in one of Rogo's popular books.³ Rogo (1981, p.75) responded:—

It is true that the founders of psychical research employed a 'case study' procedure in their work, in which they ferreted out and then tried to document each individual case that came to their attention. This approach to spontaneous case material, however, fell by the wayside during the 1940s when Dr Louisa Rhine at Duke University introduced a 'content analysis' approach to such material. Since that time, it has been considered valid in most parapsychological circles to collect large bodies of similar cases and then assume that, by and large, any data extracted from them are valid since the (presumed) majority of legitimate cases will over-balance the bogus ones. This approach to spontaneous case material is the predominant approach used in the study of 'real life' ESP and PK today, since it can yield more data about the nature of psychic occurrences than could the old 'case study' approach.

This is one of the reasons why Rogo was so careless in his collection of anecdotes. In *Miracles*, for example, Rogo printed no less than three photographs purporting to illustrate the levitation of a yogi. It must have been embarrassing for Rogo that the 'levitation' turned out to be a famous trick—

² In his book, Nickell relies heavily on Rogo's *Miracles*, which he cites constantly while omitting the author from the Name Index. Most likely, this is due to a printer's error, considering that although many names appear in the Index all those beginning with 'R' are inexplicably missing.

³ *Phone Calls from the Dead*, authored by Rogo and his friend Raymond Bayless.

even some children's books explain it! (See Hansen's 1991 exchange with Rogo on this incredible bungle.)

The point is that not even a clear exposé like this will disturb one who, like Rogo, adopts the 'content analysis' approach to invoke belief in either the miraculous or the paranormal. This is because the weight of credibility rests entirely upon the quantity of cases rather than on the evidence itself. The problem with this approach is that, with not even a single miracle having been demonstrated scientifically, it is pure faith to believe that the allegedly genuine cases "will over-balance the bogus ones".

As a counterbalance to the Rogovian methodology, Nickell, a former detective, proposes that a detective-like method is the only type scientifically appropriate for pondering the miraculous world (Nickell, 1993, p.11):—

[Rogo] stated, in response to Hume: "It is my hope to show . . . that the evidence authenticating the existence of miracles is indeed so strong that its collective falsehood would be, quite literally, miraculous." Here, Rogo is following an approach that is popularly known as the 'faggot theory'. This 'theory' holds that while one reported mystical occurrence may be discredited, just as a single stick may easily be broken, numerous reports withstand attack, just as a bundle of sticks (i.e. a faggot) resists breaking.

The problem with such a notion is readily apparent. If one case at a time can be disproved, or dismissed for lack of evidence (take an Elvis Presley sighting, for example), then the mere quantity of such cases means little if anything. (Often a rash of reports turns out to be nothing more than an original misconception or hoax, followed by what psychologists call 'social contagion' or 'mass hysteria'.)

If Hume, then, is viewed as *a priori* dismissive, Rogo is to be faulted for the opposite extreme of being entirely too credulous.

More than just a faggot theory, I would call 'the faggot fallacy' the method which Rogo and others follow (and I am afraid there are not a few of them in contemporary psychical research). Finding it impossible to investigate every single claim—especially the cases which are buried in the past—the proponent of such an approach converts his faggot of anecdotes into something unassailable. From the psychological viewpoint, however, a large number of cases put together, along with Rogo's charming narrative, suggest evidential strength. The fallacy is, therefore, a rhetorical one: for many naïve readers of *Miracles* (such as myself not long ago!) the faggot's many sticks resist indeed the breaking point of credulity. (This rhetorical trick is committed also by many other popular promoters of the paranormal.)

As an antidote to this popular snare, Nickell urges that mysteries should be investigated on a case-by-case basis. None the less, Nickell is conscious of the fact that too much should not be extrapolated concerning the cases which he has investigated personally (both in *Looking for a Miracle* and other of his books) and which he has found to be bogus. Although Nickell concedes that such bogus cases do not represent proof against the paranormal in general, he does believe that they reinforce the sceptical position.

One may conclude that since Nickell (like Rogo) has spent considerable time investigating cases involving alleged supernatural occurrences, the basic discrepancy between them is not *whether* such phenomena should be investigated, but *how*.

IS THERE A WOLF OUT THERE AFTER ALL?

In contrast to Nickell and Rogo, I am neither a sceptic nor a believer, rather an agnostic—I suffer from the same ‘relentless question’ that has tormented John Beloff throughout his life: *Does psi really exist?* Neither Christian miracles nor physical mediumship nor micro-psi can tell me anything conclusive concerning the relentless question. And if I were to dedicate myself professionally to answering it, I would not go to Duke to study rustlings plagued by the experimenter effect. Instead, I would learn Latin in order to be able to read the acts of canonization of some levitators who follow on Joseph of Copertino’s heels! (For stupendous levitations of saints other than Copertino see Thurston, 1952, chap. 1.) The objective would be to conjecture, if possible, a plausible and parsimonious counter-explanation of the alleged levitations. The trouble with this approach is that, being in the past, the cases cannot be investigated any further—and this can only result in Byzantine discussions such as those which we recently followed in this *Journal* regarding the Feilding Report on Eusapia Palladino.

With the sole purpose of avoiding that, I undertook the study of the Turin Shroud and the faces of Bélmez (Tort, 1991; 1993); both of which are mentioned in *Looking for a Miracle*. These two cases, as well as others mentioned in Nickell’s book, have an enormous advantage over cases such as Palladino’s, in that the paranormal hypothesis is scientifically falsifiable.

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